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Uncle Sam Wants You! Recruitment in the Federal Government

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WASHINGTON, DC - Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, held a hearing to review efforts by federal agencies to recruit highly qualified candidates for federal government jobs in the current job market.

Chairman Akaka's opening statement appears below:

I want to welcome our witnesses and thank you for joining us today to discuss federal government recruitment. This is such an important issue that often does not receive the attention it deserves, and I appreciate your work on this topic.

I cannot think of a better time for us to focus on federal recruitment than during Public Service Recognition Week. This week we honor the dedicated men and women working in federal, state, and local governments, who are the bedrock of our Nation's workforce. Around the country, people are taking time to recognize the contributions of public servants and promote careers in public service. For example, there is an exhibit on the National Mall this week highlighting more than 100 federal civilian and military agencies through the weekend.

Recruitment is the lifeline of a vibrant and talented workforce. From entry-level positions to the Senior Executive Service, finding talented and dedicated employees is essential to carrying out the missions of federal agencies. The federal government offers competitive benefits and recruitment incentives, which helps to make it an employer of choice. However, if agencies are not doing the leg work of recruitment and creating a candidate-friendly process, they may be undermining their appeal. While there are pockets of federal agencies that see the value of investing in these areas, all agencies must do better.

Too many agencies take a passive and reactive approach to recruitment. When a vacancy occurs, they post lengthy and confusing job announcements on a website and hope the right people apply. Agencies should develop forward-looking, strategic plans that assess critical skills gaps and target highly-qualified populations. Such plans should take into account both expected and unexpected vacancies. Human resources professionals need better training to develop these strategic efforts. Managers must be engaged throughout the process to ensure that the skills they seek are reflected in job advertisements and applications.

The federal government also needs to make the hiring process more user-friendly. Candidates should not have to abandon their federal job search in frustration with the process. Vacancy announcements should clearly explain the job's duties, qualifications, and requirements to apply. Agencies must work to make the hiring process simpler and quicker, while protecting the merit system principles. We must remember that the very best candidates may have a variety of career opportunities. They are not likely to wade through a slow, complicated, and uninformative process.

Now more than ever, agencies have an opportunity to make the federal government the employer of choice. In his inaugural address, President Obama encouraged a renewed spirit of national service for this and future generations. This renewed spirit of service is attracting people who otherwise may not have considered federal service.

We cannot afford to have stale recruitment strategies hinder our ability to build the next generation of federal employees. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) estimates that 30 percent of the federal workforce will retire in the next five years. We already have critical skills gaps in many fields, including acquisition, foreign language, engineering, human resources, information technology, and veterinary medicine. Many highly-qualified professionals in these fields may be searching for new jobs in this difficult economy. Improving federal recruitment will begin to close these critical skills gaps.

To help agencies address problems in federal recruitment and hiring, my good friend Senator Voinovich and I recently introduced the Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act, S. 736. Among other provisions, the bill addresses federal recruitment issues by requiring federal agencies to develop strategic workforce plans that include recruitment strategies and a focus on critical skills gaps. Additionally, S. 736 would require streamlined, clear, and concise job announcements that are free from confusing jargon and posted in targeted and strategic locations.

Agencies need to adapt, just as the private sector has, to the culture of the next generation of federal workers. For example, agencies should use inexpensive new media marketing tools to attract young people into federal service. And agencies should create new pipelines into the job market by targeting candidates who might not have considered public service until recently.

The federal government is the largest employer in the United States, and federal service is a noble profession. This week – Public Service Recognition Week – we celebrate those men and women who make a commitment to serve their government in the military or civilian service. In honoring these employees, we have an opportunity to inspire the next generation to pursue federal careers.

I look forward to hearing about the efforts made by OPM and our other witnesses to address shortcomings in federal recruitment, recommendations for improvement, and thoughts on the Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act.